NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 374. Price, Five Cents.

THE SIGN OF THE DAGGER

OR THE CRIME WITHOUT A NAME

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."

One glance was sufficient to prove to the others that Nick Carter had been correct in his surmises, for directly in the centre of the forehead gleamed the sign of the dagger, red, like blood, and perfectly formed.

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THE SIGN OF THE DAGGER;

OR,

The Crime Without a Name.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

AN EARLY MORNING TELEGRAM.

"Simon Gray was found dead in his room this morning. Please come to us at once."

Such were the contents of the message which Nick Carter received while he was at the breakfast table on the Sunday morning following the consummation of the arduous case against the arch fiend, Dazaar, and which had ended by finding that terrible man securely behind the bars.

Simon Gray had been an old acquaintance of the detective, and was president of the Travelers' International Bank, in Nassau Street. The message announcing his death was signed by his daughter, Miriam, and Nick realized instantly that the young woman must have been influenced by some strong and urgent reason, else she would not have resorted to the telegraph to summon him.

Three days had elapsed since the capture of Dazaar, and during that time the detective had been constantly and continuously occupied with affairs that were entirely foreign to all association with the Thibetan Lama, or his following, and because of the remarkable power of concentration which Nick inevitably applied to everything he was engaged upon, everything concerning that human devil had for the time been absent from his mind.

With the receipt of the telegram, however, Dazaar and his remarkable machinations returned to him with full force, for instantly he recalled the circumstance of his first introduction to that personage, which, in fact, had taken place in the Travelers' International Bank,

when the president, Simon Gray, presented Señor Don Murillo Cortez to his notice, merely explaining that the señor was a depositor with his bank and that he had asked for the introduction because he desired to secure the services of the detective.

Nick had not been pleasantly impressed by Señor Cortez at the time, and had therefore shadowed him when he left the bank, with the result that he speedily became convinced that if he were not actually one and the same with the villain Dazaar, they were at least closely related.

From that moment, however, Cortez had dropped out of existence, apparently, and Dazaar had come prominently into the affairs of Nick's profession.

Without admitting, even to himself, that the sudden death of Simon Gray could be in any manner due to Dazaar or his associates, he was still conscious of the direct impression that the announcement of one brought the other to mind, and he read the message a second time.

"Simon Gray was found dead in his room this morning. Please come to us at once."

He finished his breakfast as quickly as possible, and having instructed Patsy and Ten-Ichi to remain at home till his return, hastened to the home of Simon Gray, which was situated in upper Fifth Avenue, fronting the park.

When he arrived he was admitted by the negro butler, a man of unusual blackness, who was quite as old as his employer, and who had been in the service of that same family all his life; one of the few remaining old-time, incorruptible servants who serve their masters because they love them, and who accept their wages because they have always been accustomed to do so.

"Good-morning, Mr. Carter," he said, sadly and with visible traces of great grief upon his countenance and in his manner "You will find Miss Miriam, sir, in the library on the second floor, sir. She is expecting you."

"Very good, Moses. I will go up in a moment. First, however, I want a little information from you."

"Yes, sir."

"Why was I sent for?"

"Well, sir, I s'pect that's mostly due to old Moses, because it didn't seem to me to be jest exactly right that my old master should die in jest the way he did, sir."

"How did he die, Moses?"

"That I doesn't rightly know, sir."

"Tell me what happened."

"Well, sir, yesterday being Saturday, Mr. Gray got home from the bank earlier than he does other days. Usually, Saturday afternoons, he takes a drive in the park, but yesterday he allowed he didn't feel up to it, and he went to his own room almost at once. Bimeby he rang the bell for me, and told me he had a funny headache, so I got some bay-rum and rubbed his head. After that he laid down and took a nap; leastwise, he said he was going to take a nap. I carried his dinner up to him, 'cause he said he didn't feel up to coming down for it."

"Did he eat it?"

"Sure, every bit of it. Then, bimeby, he said his head ached harder than ever, and I wanted to send for the doctor, but he wouldn't let me do it. Then he curled up on the sofa in his room, and I fixed the pillows for him and covered him up warm and cozy, and came downstairs again. That was the last time I saw him alive, sir; at least, that is the last time I spoke to him, and I don't know jest when he did die; 'deed I doesn't."

"Do you mean that you did not go to his room again?"

"Huh! I done went to his room 'bout every three minutes all night, but every time I went there he

seemed to be sleeping so quiet-like that I didn't have the heart to disturb him, and I jest let him sleep. I tiptoed in and I tiptoed out again each time; and then——"

"Well?"

"When I looked in again soon arter daylight this morning he was dead."

The old negro broke down utterly here, and sobbed like a child, while Nick waited for him to recover his calmness.

"What did you do then?" asked the detective.

"I called Miss Miriam, and she sent me for a doctor."

"So the doctor has been here, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he have to say about it?"

"Mighty little, sir. He shook his head and looked sorter wise and said he hadn't any doubt it was apperplexion that killed the marster; but 'deed, sir, I don't think it was any apperplexion that killed him."

"What do you think, Moses?"

"I dunno, sir. Apperplexion never left no mark behind it like the one that is on marster, that I ever heard of."

"A mark? Where? What sort of a mark?"

"Jest over his left temple, sir. It isn't more than an inch and a half or two inches long, and it ain't more than half an inch wide, except about a third of the way from one end of it, where there is another mark crosses it. It might be the shape of a cross, sir, if it wasn't sharp at one end and round at the other, but as it is it looks jest like the picture of a dagger, and that's what I think it is."

"The picture of a dagger?"

"Yassir, the picture of a dagger, made with blood."

"Moses, I am afraid that the shock of your master's death has unbalanced your mind."

"No 'tain't. It's jest done cleared away a hull lot of cobwebs that were floatin' around in my mind before it happened."

"You will have to explain that statement to me later, Moses; after I have seen and talked with your young mistress."

"That's jest what I wants ter do, Mr. Carter. I know that that there mark wasn't made by apperplexion."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"It's hoodoo."

The old negro bent forward until his face was within a few inches of the detective's, and he breathed the fateful word in a mysterious whisper that was filled with terror.

"We'll drop all that for the present, Moses," said Nick. "What I want to know now is if the doctor made out his death certificate, and if the coroner has been here and given his opinion of the case."

"Well, sir, all that went jest like clockwork. The doctor done told Miss Miriam that he'd attend to everything and that she needn't give herself no concern about things at all, and he went away and brought back the coroner and some other gemlen, and they locked theirselves in the room, and when they went away the doctor told Miss Miriam that everything was all right, and that there was no doubt that the marster died of apperplexion, and that there wouldn't have ter be any autotopsies and that she wasn't to worry."

"Nevertheless, Moses, she sent for me. Of course she would have notified me of her father's death in any case, but—has she any idea that things are not as the doctor said? That things are not all right?"

"Nothin' but jest that mark, sir. I done told her that it was a hoodoo mark, and that it wasn't no apperplexion that put it there, and I begged her to let me send for you."

"So it was you who sent the message?"

"Yassir. But she told me to sign her name to it."

"What did the doctor think about the mark over your master's temple?"

"He said it was made by the bursting of little blood vessels inside, under the skin, and that the shape of it was only an accident."

"Which is probably correct."

The old negro shook his head violently.

"That mark is the mark of hoodoo," he insisted, with deep conviction.

"You have more reasons than you have told me for saying that, haven't you? Something about those cobwebs, eh?"

"I dunno's you'll think they're reasons, sir, but after you've seen Miss Miriam I'll tell you about them; but I jest do know this, sir: There's been a hoodoo in this house, and that there dagger mark is his sign. Old Moses thinks he knows that, for sure."

CHAPTER II.

THE DAGGERS OF DAZAAR.

Nick found Miriam Gray awaiting him in the library, as Moses had indicated, and he was greatly shocked by the change that had taken place in her appearance since he saw her last.

Her face, always exquisitely beautiful under the wealth of golden hair with which her shapely head was crowned, and always, heretofore, delicately tinged with the wholesome blushes of youthful health, was now white and drawn, and infinitely sad, and her great blue eyes, always so filled with laughter and the joy of living, seemed to have doubled in size and to have lost all their sparkle of happiness and mischief.

She arose from a low chair to greet him when he entered the room, and then sank back into it again in a listless, hopeless manner that was pitiful.

"It is your first great sorrow, Miriam," he said, for he was on terms of intimacy in that house. "You lost your mother before you were old enough to realize what her death meant to you, and all your life your father has been your best chum; but, my dear child, you are a woman now—you are almost twenty—and you must meet your sorrows as a woman should. Did you have any especial reason for directing Moses to send for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter, I had; but I am almost afraid to tell you of it."

"Why so?"

"Because you will pronounce it absurd."

"Nevertheless, Miriam, I think you should tell me what is on your mind."

She hesitated a moment, and then, quite slowly, she said:

"Do you not think the manner of my father's death was very strange?"

"It was very sudden and unexpected, certainly. Moses tells me that it was due to apoplexy."

"But was it?"

"Why do you ask that question, since the doctors have given their opinions?"

"Because I fear—I fear."

"What do you fear?"

"That it was not apoplexy; that his death was due to some other and widely different cause."

"To what, then?"

"Oh, I do not know; but——"

"Well, Miriam?"

"Is it possible, Mr. Carter, that there might have been foul play?"

"It does not seem probable, and therefore scarcely possible."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, not yet."

"Come with me.'

She rose and led the way from the library into the room where her father was already prepared for burial,

although the coffin had not yet been brought to the house.

She pulled back the sheet that covered his face, and then, taking a step backward, pointed with her index finger at an angry red mark that gleamed in startling contrast with the death pallor of his skin, against, or rather just above his left temple.

"What could have caused that hideous mark?" she demanded, almost whispering the words in the intensity of her suppressed excitement.

The detective did not reply at once, but he stepped between Miriam and the shrouded figure, and bending low over the bier, studied with great care the strange and inexplicable imprint.

It was precisely the shape and form of a dagger; that is, of a two-edged knife, with short and heavy hilt and knobbed guard; but he saw more than that, for he recalled the fact that not long ago a knife of exactly the same pattern had spoiled with its point the Yale lock on his own front door; that another like it had been flung against the door and imbedded itself in the wood, barely missing his assistant, Patsy; that still another one, identical in shape, had pinned a note against the wall inside his own dwelling; that a fourth one had been sent to him as a sample of what these strange knives were like, and that a fifth was at that moment at police headquarters, in the possession of the chief of the detective bureau, where it had been sent to him and to Inspector McClusky.

Each and every one of those knives had at one time belonged to Dazaar, the arch fiend, and here, against the brow of all that remained of Simon Gray, the banker, was a miniature reproduction of those knives, or daggers, as finely and as perfectly drawn as if the pen of a gifted artist had traced it there, in blood.

"Is it possible that the hand of Dazaar can be discovered here, in the sudden death of my friend Gray?" he asked himself. "If it is true that he has had anything to do with this, can it be that one of his methods of bringing suffering upon me is to murder my best friends, one by one? Is this another evidence of the devilish ingenuity of that terrible man?"

Deep in his own heart he felt the conviction that he had guessed correctly; and yet, was it not also true that several doctors had already passed upon this case and pronounced that death was due to apoplexy?

Even while these thoughts were passing in his mind, he heard Miriam utter a little gasp, and turning to her, discovered that she was again pointing at the mark.

"What is it?" he asked. "What new thing have you discovered now?"

"The mark has changed since I first saw it," she asserted, not moving from her position.

"Changed?"

"Yes; it has grown larger, and it is not as perfectly and finely drawn as when I first saw it. The mark is spreading."

"Are you sure, Miriam?"

"I am positive."

"But would not that very fact uphold the theory of the doctor that it was caused by the bursting of capillary vessels, that the shape of the mark is a mere accident, and that the spreading and enlargement of it is due to natural causes?"

"Perhaps," she admitted, and relapsed into her former attitude.

"Your father's face seems to be in repose, as if he had suffered no pain," said Nick.

"And yet Moses tells me that he complained of a severe pain in his head before he lay down to rest on the couch where he died."

"It has left no traces upon his features."

"No," she admitted.

"Come," said Nick. "Let us go back to the library. I will return here alone, presently—after you have told me all about your fears and misgivings. Rest assured,

Miriam, if there is a cause for your father's death other than the one given by the doctors, we will find it, and if there is a man or a set of men behind that cause we will find them also. Come."

When they had returned to the library, Nick, in his kindest tone, said to her:

"Now, Miriam, let me hear what it is that troubles you."

For answer she left her chair again and crossed the room to a mahogany desk where the banker had been accustomed to sit while he was engaged with his papers at home. From one of the drawers she lifted an article that was wrapped in chamois skin and placed it in the detective's hands.

"Tell me what you think of that," she said, resuming her chair.

Nick undid the folds of the chamois skin, and then, in spite of himself, drew one quick breath of surprise.

"Do you recognize the likeness?" demanded Miriam.

He nodded an affirmative, for the article that was revealed by the unwinding of the soft skin that covered it was the inevitable and now cruelly familiar Dazaar dagger. It was in every way the exact counterpart of those at his house, and of the one in the possession of the chief of detectives; and also, it might have been the original from which the drawing of a dagger on the brow of Miriam's dead father had been made.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, without raising his eyes.

"It came by express to my father, only yesterday," she replied.

"From where? From whom?"

"He had no idea. There was no card with it. He thought it might have been sent to him for a paper cutter, but it seemed too heavy for that. He said it was very curious workmanship, and quite interesting, so he wrapped it in the chamois, making the remark that the person who sent it would reveal himself sooner or later."

"What time did it come yesterday?"

"In the morning, before he went downtown to business."

"You say he seemed to have no idea who sent it to him?"

"None at all."

"Did he say if he had ever seen another like it?"

"No; on the contrary, he remarked that he had not."

"And why have you called my attention to it now?"

"Can you ask that question?"

"Because it is so like the mark——"

He paused inquiringly, and she nodded.

"When did you first notice this likeness?"

"About an hour ago."

"You did not remark it when your father was first discovered?"

"No. I did not notice the mark at all then. Neither, I think, did Moses. In fact, Mr. Carter, I do not think the mark was on his face when he died. I am convinced that it was placed there, or that it came there of its own accord, afterward."

"Miriam, did you ever hear your father mention a man whose name was Cortez?"

"Yes; I have seen the man. He was here, in this very room with my father, Friday evening."

"Friday evening!" exclaimed Nick, starting to his feet. "You must be mistaken. I think I know where that man was on Friday, and it certainly was not here."

"He was here, Mr. Carter," she insisted, with conviction.

"In that case it is I who am mistaken," he said.

But all the same he knew differently. In his own mind he had long been satisfied that Cortez and the man Dazaar were one and the same, and that the person of supposed Spanish ancestry, to whom Gray had

introduced him, was merely one of the seven personalities which were used by Dazaar, for he had never for an instant believed that Dazaar was only one among seven actual and separate persons.

But Nick knew positively that Dazaar was locked securely in a cell and was closely watched by picked men on Friday night, and now Miriam assured him with a positiveness that could not be denied that Cortez was in that very room where he was now sitting, on that same Friday night in question.

The detective was forced to confess to himself that he was greatly puzzled.

He could not avoid an intuitive impression that amounted almost to a belief, that the fiend Dazaar was in some manner associated with the death of Simon Gray, and yet he realized that on the face of the information in his possession it was preposterous to entertain such a belief for a moment.

His first duty he knew to be to quiet the fears of Miriam, and to that effort he turned his attention.

"Miriam," he said, "it is worse than useless for you to permit yourself to imagine that the death of your father could or can be accounted for in any other way than the one that has been given by the doctors."

She shook her head negatively.

"I understand your purpose in saying that," she replied, "but I honestly believe, and I will always believe, without knowing why I believe it, that my father was murdered."

"But you must not permit yourself to harbor——"

"I shall always believe that—and more," she said.

"What more, Miriam?"

"That this man Cortez, to whom you have referred, was my father's enemy and wished for his death. Still more, Mr. Carter, I live in terror of him ever since I looked into his cruel eyes. His presence haunts me whichever way I turn. I fear him; oh! how I fear him! I am sure that he killed my father, and I am just as certain that he intends in some manner to add me to his list of victims."

CHAPTER III.

A CRIME WITHOUT A NAME.

The detective took a quick turn up and down the room before replying to Miriam's last remark.

The circumstances surrounding the death of Simon Gray were extremely puzzling, and he was forced to admit to himself that the coincidences associated with it pointed, without exception, the finger of accusation at Dazaar as being the instigator, if not the actual perpetrator of a crime which had resulted in the banker's sudden and mysterious taking off.

More than all else in significance was the dagger wrapped in chamois skin.

Nick believed that he could see behind the apparent motive and into the real one, in connection with that circumstance, and his understanding of it furnished the most direct proof, in his opinion, of the presence of Dazaar's handiwork in the crime, if crime there was.

That it was Dazaar who had sent the dagger to Mr. Gray, was without doubt.

That he could have had no direct motive, like the giving of a warning or the uttering of a menace which the banker might have been expected to understand when he received the dagger, was also without doubt, for the simple and apparent reason that Mr. Gray had never heard of the significance of those daggers, had never seen one before he received that particular one, and therefore the receipt of it could have no more meaning to him than the one he had attributed to the unknown sender, of the intention to make him a present.

But the real motive, according to Nick's line of reasoning, was this:

Dazaar, in sending the dagger, had already resolved upon the death of Gray, and he meant that the dagger

should be seen by Nick Carter after that death had been consummated, in order that Nick Carter—and Nick Carter alone among all men—should know whose hand was responsible for the blow.

The sending of the dagger for the detective to discover after the commission of the crime, therefore, resolved itself into an epitome of the impertinence and the insolence of criminal bravado. It was as if Dazaar himself had suddenly stepped into the library where the detective was engaged with the daughter of the dead banker, and boastfully uttered the announcement:

"I planned the death of Simon Gray, but you cannot prove it. I caused the death of Simon Gray, but you cannot even explain it. I killed Simon Gray, but you could not make even the doctors who made out the death certificate believe me. I sent the dagger to him in order that you would find it after the blow fell upon him, knowing that you would understand why I sent it. I placed the sign of the dagger upon his brow as an additional evidence to you of my proximity and of my power; and I have done all this because I know that you personally will be enlightened, but that you will find it utterly impossible to convince others of your belief."

Here, then, was a crime without a name.

It was murder, of course, since Dazaar, by the sending of the weapon to his prospective victim and by the making of the sign of the dagger upon his brow, had as positively announced himself as the murderer as if he had made the statement in open court; but Dazaar had been in prison four days when the victim died. How, then, could his connection with the crime be established?

Manifestly, the attempt to do so would be absurd. Manifestly, a man who was confined in a prison cell, and constantly watched over by four men, could establish an incontrovertible alibi.

For once in his experience, the detective found himself up against a metaphorical blank wall which seemed not only insurmountable, but absolutely void of suggestion; and while he strode to the end of the room and returned—while these reflections passed through his mind, he decided that the only method by which he could ever hope to establish the fact that a crime had been committed and trace the commission of it to Dazaar, or to anybody, would be to appear to accept the statement of the doctors that death was due to natural causes; and with that resolution fully developed in his mind, he turned again to Miriam.

"I think, Miriam," he said, "that for the present at least, we must dismiss all idea that a crime has been committed in this house. You know, my dear, that I was your father's friend, and that I am yours. I will return to the room where his body lies, alone, and I will make some further investigation. After that, I will call upon the doctor and have a talk with him, and if I can find any indication whatever that your fears are well founded, rest assured that I will see to it that everything possible is done. But I think now that we must accept the doctor's statement."

Miriam bowed her head in acknowledgment of what he said to her, but it was plainly to be seen that she was not convinced. Nick continued:

"Let us for a moment turn our attention to yourself. I want you to tell me why you experience such a deadly fear of the man Cortez, and why you suppose him to be seeking victims and to have included you among his list of them."

"I do not know, unless the feeling is intuitive," she replied.

"But there must be something more than mere intuition to account for such a pronounced effect upon you."

"I cannot tell what it was that affected me. When he touched me, I was chilled to the marrow, and yet I burned all over. I have heard the sensation produced

by the extreme of heat and cold are the same. I seemed to experience both when he took my hand."

"You said also something about his eyes being cruel. I thought his eyes were unusually soft and kind in their expression. Tell me how they affected you."

"They were soft and kind when I first acknowledged his greeting. I thought them wonderful eyes—marvelous eyes; but once while he was here, I looked up suddenly and caught them fixed upon me with an expression so terrible that I cried out."

"And then——"

"My father asked me what was the matter, and, of course, I could not explain. That was all."

"But what did you see in the eyes of Cortez that made you cry out?"

"Menace, cruelty, death, gloating exultation. Oh, it was awful, awful. I shudder now when I think of them."

"You are still positive that this occurred on Friday evening?"

"Certainly."

"You have not seen him since that time?"

"No."

"Did your father see him again?"

"I do not know."

"Did he speak of him after Cortez went away, or on Saturday morning, when the express package arrived?"

"No. His name was not mentioned between us at all. I meant to talk with my father about him to-day, but——"

"Now, Miriam, I want you to go to your room and rest, if you can. I know that you will not want for friends and assistance in your trouble."

"Both my aunts will be here shortly, and Moses will superintend everything. But you will come again later in the day, Mr. Carter?"

"Certainly."

"Please do so. I cannot explain why I feel as I do, but the menace of impending evil hangs over me. I fear that my father's death is only the first of a series of terrible events that are to happen. It is foolish of me, no doubt, but I cannot help it. And I will feel much safer if I know that you are coming back again."

Nick conducted Miriam to the door of her own room and saw her enter and close it after her. Then he repaired at once to the death chamber.

One glance at the corpse convinced him that Miriam had been correct when she said the impression of the sign of the dagger above the old man's temple was spreading. It had become perceptibly larger during the short time that had elapsed since he visited the room with her. Moreover, it was steadily losing its well defined shape, and under the present rate of development, he realized that in another hour the impression would have become an egg-shaped blurr from which the outlines of the dagger would be obliterated.

He saw, too, that the mark had taken on a deeper hue of red. That from a scarlet, it had deepened into a crimson which would ultimately change into a purple of that peculiar tinge which is popularly described as black and blue.

After he left the room, a further talk with old Moses developed nothing further, and so the detective took his departure, making his way straight to the home of the doctor.

"Will you tell me, doctor, why you and the coroner decided that an autopsy on the body of Mr. Gray is unnecessary?" he demanded.

"Simply because the cause of death is so apparent," was the reply.

"Indeed! And you attribute that cause to apoplexy?"

"Most assuredly."

"I was under the impression that post mortem examinations in cases of this kind were compulsory."

"So they are, as a rule; but the coroner has discretionary powers."

"Even so; but where there can be any doubt at all concerning the cause of death, may not an interested party insist that an autopsy be held?"

"I believe so; but in this case there is absolutely no doubt."

"You seem extremely positive."

"I am so, since the coroner passed upon this case. The symptoms, although new to the medical profession generally, were familiar to him."

Nick was amazed at this reply, but he concealed the fact.

"Do you mean to imply," he asked, "that the coroner has seen other cases like this one of Simon Gray's?"

"Yes."

"Including the peculiar mark on Mr. Gray's brow?"

"Yes, including that strange mark."

"You astonish me, sir."

"The coroner has had three other cases within two weeks where the same mark has been present."

"Three other cases! May I ask if the marks, in each case, were shaped the same?"

"They were precisely the same in each case, though not always in the same locality on the body."

"Shaped like a dagger?"

"Yes, sir, shaped like a dagger."

"Were autopsies performed in those other cases?"

"Upon two of them. The results were the same; the decisions were the same."

"It all seems very strange, doctor. What was the location of the marks in the other cases?"

"I did not see the cases, but the coroner has described them to me. In the case of Mr. Gray, the mark, as you know, was over the left temple. On the other occasions they were, respectively, in the middle of the back of the head, under the hair, another over the right temple, and a third was almost directly over the heart on the left side of the body. Possibly it was somewhat to the left of the heart; about under the spot covered by the upper waistcoat pocket, I should say."

Nick was silent a moment, and then he said:

"So, then, in this case of Mr. Gray, the coroner having seen three other cases that were precisely similar in character, and having performed autopsies on two of them, believed that he was entirely justified in attributing death to apoplexy?"

"Entirely. He is positively assured. As the family physician, I should have insisted upon a post mortem, but when the coroner permitted me to read the histories of the other cases and I realized how thorough had been the examinations, and how precisely like this one they were, I agreed with him that it would be a waste of time and an unnecessary addition to the sorrow of the bereaved daughter, to insist upon an examination after death. I think you will agree with me in that decision, Mr. Carter. I know that you were a close friend of Gray's, and you know that I was his friend as well as his physician."

He reached out his hand and the detective took it silently, then took his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MICROBE OF MURDER.

Thirty minutes later the detective was closeted with the coroner.

In a very few words he related the object of his call, closing with this remark:

"The death of Simon Gray seems to me to possess many of the elements of mystery, and as his friend as well as in the capacity of the daughter's confidant, I would like to know precisely your reasons for deciding offhand that death in this case was due to apoplexy. Dr. Colton tells me that you have had three similar cases, and that you performed, or witnessed the per-

formance of an autopsy upon two of them. Is that true as he understands it?"

"The statement is literally true."

"The cases were the same?"

"Identically the same."

"The mark was the same and the shape of the mark, likewise."

"Precisely."

"But the locations of the marks were different, I understand."

"Yes; one on the right side of the head; one on the back of the head and one almost over the nipple of the left breast."

"Under the spot where the waistcoat pocket should be located?"

"Exactly."

"Will you tell me where these cases were, and who they were?"

"All were men. The first was an employee on one of the ferry-boats that plies between Fort Lee and One Hundred and Thirtieth Street."

"Indeed!" said Nick. And mentally he added: "The direct route between New York and the house of the Seven Devils, where Dazaar resides." Then aloud: "Where was the second?"

"The second was a clerk in the Hotel Kalamanka, on One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street."

"And the third?"

"That was a young man, or rather a boy, for he was not yet twenty years old. He was a driver of a department store delivery wagon."

"Did he deliver goods in the northwestern section of the city?"

"Yes. In fact, he fell from his wagon at Broadway and One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street."

"I will take a copy of the names and addresses where each of these men lived, if you have no objection."

"None whatever."

"Now, will you tell me where the mark of the dagger was found on each of them?"

"Certainly. John Horner, the ferryman, died on a Sunday at his home. The mark in his case was at the back of the head. Henry Malcolm, the hotel clerk, was taken ill while at work behind his desk. He complained of severe pains over his heart, went to his room and laid down on a couch with his clothes on. He was found dead there, three or four hours later. The mark on his body was, as I have described it, almost over the heart."

"But how could you attribute that case to apoplexy?"

"It was one upon which an autopsy was performed. There were evidences of congestion underneath the mark and the heart sack was swollen and discolored; but the brain told the true story. He died of apoplexy."

"Where was the mark located in the third case?"

"That was Peter Druss, the delivery wagon driver. It was directly against the right temple."

"In that case you held no post mortem?"

"No. I did not regard it as necessary, any more than I did in the case of Mr. Gray."

"How do you account for the presence of the mark at all?"

"I do not account for it."

"But you have a theory?"

"Naturally; only I have not established it yet."

"And, like all doctors, you hesitate to express an opinion, until you have a decided one to express, or——"

"Or until I have read a paper that I am now preparing for the next meeting of our medical association."

"When you can have the benefit of the opinions of others?"

"Precisely."

"Will you give me the benefit of your theory?"

"It would hardly be appreciated by a layman. How-

ever, it is about this—— But, no. I think I will not go into that at present."

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Coroner, you have no tenable theory at all, have you?"

"I am afraid if the simple truth were told, I have not, save on the possible basis that a new and unknown element or germ which acts directly upon the lesser blood vessels of the body and which ultimately produces what we call apoplexy, has developed. The case of Mr. Gray has decided me that this theory, so far as it goes, is correct."

"You confidently expect, then, to hear of other similar cases?"

"I shall be greatly disappointed if I do not."

"The devil you will!" said Nick.

"I mean, of course, professionally. I mean that I expect them, not that I desire them."

"Whatever you do mean, you are satisfied in your own mind that there is a species of apoplectic epidemic in our midst; is that it?"

"About that; yes."

"I will bid you good-day, Mr. Coroner; but before I go, I should like to make a wager with you."

"On this subject?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"This: You will search for the germs of this new disease with your microscope and among the gems of wisdom which will fall from the mouths of your associates in the medical society when next you meet. I shall search for them by simply asking questions of the persons who were associated with the victims of this strange and fatal disease, and by close and careful observation along those lines. Now I will wager that I find the germ before you do."

"Nonsense!" said the coroner, wrathfully. "You couldn't find a germ with a telescope, and you wouldn't recognize one if you saw it."

"Wouldn't I? I begin to think I have been rather close to one for the last ten minutes."

"Have you, indeed? The germ of what?"

"The most monumental and self-satisfied incompetency I ever heard of."

"Do you come here for the purpose of insulting me, sir?"

"No. I came here to acquire information."

"You have a strange manner of showing your appreciation of my courtesy."

"Perhaps that is true. I did not intend to offend you, so we need not quarrel, but there is one thing in connection with these cases that I want to say."

"What is that?"

"When another case of this sort happens—and I have good reason to believe that more will happen—I want to be informed of it, and I shall insist that an autopsy be performed, no matter what your opinion on the subject may chance to be."

"And what," asked the coroner, plainly irritated, "do you expect to find, more than I have already described as appearing from examinations after death?"

"I expect to find, provided there are competent surgeons present, that death will be due to causes that are purely local, and that the germ you speak of so confidently, does its hideous work from the outside, and not from the inside of the body of its victim."

"Oh! You do, eh?"

"Yes, I do. And more than that."

"What more, may I ask?"

"That the germ—we will call it by that name at present, for want of a better word—is handled by the fingers of a man before it works upon the brain or the heart of its victims. In short, Mr. Coroner, that these deaths are not due to natural causes at all, but are crimes—murders, in fact; and I think that I know whereof I speak."

"You certainly speak like a crazy man."

"Perhaps. We will see about that. Good-day, Mr. Coroner."

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN IN THE BACKGROUND.

"Plainly, my next step should be to visit headquarters and have a look at Dazaar," was the detective's comment, made mentally to himself, as he descended the steps of the coroner's residence, and accordingly he boarded a car for that destination immediately.

The inspector was absent from his office when Nick arrived there, but he came in almost immediately, and together they repaired to the cell occupied by Dazaar.

He was still there, of course, and he appeared to be sleeping, nor could the efforts of his watcher and of Nick himself arouse him sufficiently to obtain more than a few unintelligible grunts in response to their questions.

"He has been like this ever since you brought him here," said the inspector. "At first I was convinced that he had managed to conceal and take into the cell with him some form of dope, but I have had him thoroughly searched half a dozen times with no result, so I have come to the conclusion that it is nothing more or less than surliness and acting."

"Have him brought into your private office for a few minutes, and let your men guard each door while he is there," said Nick. "I want to ask him a few questions. Perhaps we can make him talk if we get him there."

The order was given, and a few moments later Dazaar stood before the two men alone in the inspector's room.

He stared at them vacantly and sleepy-eyed. Every trace of intelligence seemed to have gone from his face and eyes. In fact, he manifested every appearance of a man who is far gone under the influence of morphine but who still has sense enough to stand erect and to walk.

"Dazaar," said Nick, "this sort of acting won't work with us."

There was no response. Only a blinking of the vacant eyes.

"Would you like me to tell you about Irma Plavatski?"

Still the eyes blinked and there came no response in words. Nevertheless, Nick could detect a slumbrous, resentful gleam in that glassy stare, that resembled the sodden fury of a maddened bull.

"She is dead," said Nick, telling the falsehood glibly enough in the hope of startling the man.

"You lie," said Dazaar, calmly, and Nick laughed outright.

"You are right, I did," he admitted. "I am afraid I am not a good liar. Now, however, I will tell you the truth about her. She has made a confession and has been transferred from the hospital to the prison. Isn't that what you have just told me, inspector?" asked Nick, turning to the officer, who nodded an affirmative.

Still Dazaar seemed unmoved; but his wits appeared to be slowly returning, for he asked:

"Did she confess to you, or to him?"

"To the inspector," replied Nick. "I have not seen her since I took her to the hospital."

"Much good her confession may do you," said Dazaar.

"You may rest assured that it will do considerable harm to you," replied the inspector.

"Perhaps," assented Dazaar, and he relapsed again into the state of stupor he assumed so perfectly.

Neither the detective nor the inspector could draw another word from him after that, and as soon as he was returned to his cell he threw himself upon his cot and again seemed to lapse into unconsciousness.

"What do you make of him, inspector?" asked Nick, when they were again in the private office together.

"Nothing. He has decided to play the part he is acting now, and unless I am greatly mistaken he will continue to play it to the end of the game, and I should not be surprised if in the end he should succeed in convincing our brilliant alienists that he is insane."

"Now about the confession of Irma Plavatski; what is there of that?"

The inspector smiled with amusement.

"She is as crazy as a loon, Nick," he replied. "I am glad that you acted upon my suggestion and remained away from her for a few days, and I want you to continue to do so for a while. The fact is, she has made three separate confessions in as many days, and each one is different from either of the others. What the fourth will be, I haven't an idea, but whatever it is, I will get it to-day."

"All right. Now one more question. Have your men kept a close watch on Dazaar's house, as I requested?"

"That they have."

"Well?"

"Not a living soul has entered or left either of those houses—the one you call Dazaar's, or the one where Irma Plavatski and Madam Aira lived—since they have been on the watch."

"They haven't seen anybody at all, eh?"

"No; nor a sign of anybody. The places seem deserted."

"Yet I know that there are a dozen or more of the wild Thibetan niggers, as well as other servants there."

"I don't deny it, only I know that not one of them has shown himself."

"If you will get a permit from the Jersey sheriff, we will raid those houses to-night. What do you say, chief?"

"Agreed."

"I want to see the inside of them."

"So do I, since what you have said."

"Then you will go with us?"

"Sure."

"Good. Shall I meet you here?"

"No. Meet us there. Be on the ground at midnight. I think that will be a good time."

Nick rose to take his leave."

"Inspector," he said, pausing with one hand on the knob of the door, "I have about made up my mind that we have been fooled."

"How, Nick?"

"That Dazaar is not Dazaar at all."

"I don't think I quite catch on."

"I mean that we think we have Dazaar, but that we haven't got him at all."

"That this fellow here is not Dazaar after all?"

"Just that."

"You said he was, when you brought him here. That is all I am supposed to know about it. If anybody has been fooled, you're the man."

"Correct. Well, I admit the impeachment. I've changed my mind."

"This is the same chap we had the first time. If we haven't got him now, we have never had him."

"There I do not agree with you."

"This is the same fellow, Nick."

"I thought so when I brought him here, but I've changed my mind."

The inspector shook his head doubtfully.

"You remember all that talk about there being seven of these devils?" asked the detective.

"Certainly."

"Very well, I begin to think that there are seven after all."

"Seven Dazaars?"

"In effect—yes."

"I confess that I do not follow your reasoning."

"Why, I mean simply this: That there are seven tools of Dazaar, and that this fellow we have got here is only one of the tools. The king pin of the whole outfit—the main guy, the arch fiend himself, remains in the background all the time."

"By Jove, Nick, if this is true——"

"If it is true, I fear that we will have to cut off all the seven heads before we get to Dazaar himself."

CHAPTER VI.

A GREATER MYSTERY THAN EVER.

The detective went directly to his own house after leaving the inspector at the central office, and having arrived there, immediately called Ten-Ichi and Patsy to him.

"Lads," he said to them, "I want a little real, old-fashioned work done by each of you to-day, and I want it done as quickly as possible. Here are the names and former addresses of three men who have died very suddenly, and somewhat mysteriously, within the last two weeks," and he placed on the desk before him the slip of paper which bore the names of Horner, Malcolm and Druss, copied by him while he was at the office of the coroner.

Then, in his inimitably direct manner, he related the meager collection of facts as he had obtained them from the coroner.

"Now," he said, in conclusion, "I want you, Ten-Ichi, to take the cases of Horner and young Peter Druss; and you, Patsy, are to follow up the lines connected with Henry Malcolm. I cannot give either of you any particular lines to work upon, more than to say that I want to know all that you can find out about the habits and associates of each of these men during the month preceding their deaths. That is all for the present. I do not even know if you will find anything at all that is worth remembering, but there is a possibility that you may. Work on your own lines, and if you are detained so that you cannot get back here early in the evening, I want both of you to meet me at the One Hundred and Thirtieth Street ferry in time for the ten-thirty boat to-night."

After the assistants left him, Nick remained wrapt in thought in his study for half an hour, after which he crossed through the subterranean passage to the other house, which fronts on the next street, and, ascending to the top floor, tapped against the door of the rear room.

It was opened almost immediately by the big, powerful woman who served Nick in the capacity of nurse and general helper, and of whom he had often said that in some ways she was equal to half a dozen men.

"Martha," said the detective, "tell Madam Aira that I want five minutes' talk with her, and while we are talking I want you to wait here outside the door. I do not wish to be detained when I am ready to go, and I don't want the madam to escape from your watchful eyes for a single moment. Has she discovered that she is virtually a prisoner?"

"Yes, sir, but she seems to be glad that she is."

When Nick entered the room a moment later, Madam Aira was standing in the middle of the floor awaiting him, and she received him with a stately dignity which was not assumed, but which belonged to good breeding and the pride of ancestry.

"Be seated, madam," said Nick, himself taking a chair. "I have deemed it best to leave you entirely to your own devices and thoughts since I brought you here, otherwise I would have called upon you before this. I hope you have been comfortable?"

"Entirely so, thank you, sir."

"And if it has occurred to you that you have been in a measure under restraint, I hope you have appreciated that it has been so more as a method of protection for you than as an imprisonment against your will."

"I think I understand that point also, sir."

"Doubtless you are anxious to know about Irma Plavatski, so I will preface what I have to say by telling you that I have not personally seen her since the evening I brought you here, but I am told that she is quite well and contented."

Madam bowed in acknowledgment of the statement, but made no comment.

"I shall take up the circumstances attending your relations with her and the strange malady from which she is supposed to be suffering, later on. At the present moment my mind is absorbed in another matter, and it is that and that alone which I desire to discuss with you to-day. I will promise you, however, that within two days I will have seen Irma personally, and that if you desire it I will perhaps find a means to bring you together for an interview. Are you content with that promise?"

"Quite so, sir."

"Very well, then, we will put that phase of our interview aside for the present."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Carter?"

"Are you disposed to be of assistance to me, if it is in your power to do so, in this strange contest I am engaged in with Dazaar?"

"I am, sir."

"Then I beg that you will give me the benefit of all information you have in your possession concerning him."

"Alas, sir, my own information is almost as meager as your own."

"And yet you have been associated with him for a considerable time."

"If my relations with Dazaar can be described in the way you have expressed it, that is quite true, sir."

"How would you describe them?"

"Simply by saying that I have been his prisoner. I do not mean in the sense of locked doors and padlocked chains, but, nevertheless, his prisoner."

"Since when?"

"For five years."

"When did you first know Irma Plavatski?"

"When she was a baby in arms. I knew her parents. I knew all her relatives. The whole family was exiled to Siberia by the Czar. Irma was born there. I was also an exile. That explains how I came to know them."

"And you have known her continuously since that time?"

"By no means, sir. I lost sight of her while she was still a little child, not yet five years of age, and I did not see her again until a year after I had fallen under the influence of Dazaar."

"She was with him then?"

"She was, then, exactly as you see her now."

"How, then, could you know that she was the same person whom you had known as a child?"

"By her wonderful resemblance to her cousin Olga, and by her memory of incidents in her early life with which I was familiar."

"You have no doubt, then, that she really is the same Irma Plavatski whom you knew as a mere child?"

"I have had many doubts on that point at times. I cannot say that I do not doubt, for there are times when I feel assured that she is not the same, just as there are times when I am equally positive that she must be the same."

"Very well, we will leave that line of questioning for the present. What you have said tends to uphold a theory of my own which we will discuss at another time. Now to the subject of my call to-day."

"Very well, sir."

"Who is Dazaar?"

"I do not know."

"Describe Dazaar's personal appearance, as you really have seen him."

I cannot, for the reason that I do not know that I have ever really seen him."

"Do you mean to say that you have been associated with him, have been his prisoner and more or less under his influence for five years, and yet that you do not know that you have ever seen the man?"

"I do not even know that he is a man."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nick; and he remained silent for a moment, thinking.

"And yet," he said, presently, "you seemed tacitly to agree with me that the man whom we captured at the house where you lived, and who is now in prison, was Dazaar."

"So far as my knowledge would tend to the contrary belief, he might be Dazaar. In other words, sir, it is simply this: I did not know that he was not and is not Dazaar."

"You had seen that same man many times before?"

"Certainly."

"And at those other times had believed him to be Dazaar?"

"Either the man himself or his instrument, sir."

"Ah! Now we are getting at it. Suppose this man whom we captured to be merely an instrument of the head devil—taking the subject on that basis, are there other instruments like him?"

"Many, sir."

"How many?"

"I do not know."

"How many have you seen?"

"Seven, I think, that I may be sure of."

"And among the seven am I to understand that you do not know that any one of these men was not Dazaar?"

"Exactly that."

"And also that any one of the seven might have been Dazaar himself?"

"Yes."

"Was the man Thompson one of the instruments?"

"No. He was one of the victims?"

"You speak as if there were many."

"There have been hundreds during the five years of my acquaintance with the facts."

"Returning to the instruments. Do the seven whom you recall resemble one another?"

"Yes and no."

"Please explain that answer."

"There is always a certain resemblance of feature, of physique, of mannerism and of method; and also there has always been a distinct difference. Seeing them separately, I have sometimes thought the resemblance remarkable, but I doubt if it would be appreciable if they were seen together."

"Have you ever seen two of these instruments, as you call them, together?"

"Never, sir."

"Then all the seven might be, as a matter of fact, one and the same man?"

"I have sometimes had that idea, only to have my mind utterly disabused of it again."

"Still you think it possible?"

"Possible, yes. I do not, however, think it probable."

"So Dazaar is really as great a mystery to you now as he was five years ago?"

"A greater one, sir."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CREED OF DAZAAR.

"We will turn from that point a moment, now, and consider another one."

"Very well, sir."

"You have just referred to Dazaar's victims; you have said that there have been hundreds of them during the five years of your association with these affairs."

"That is true."

"Tell me exactly what you mean by that expression."

"I refer to human beings who have been compelled to suffer tortures, both mental and physical, by the awful ingenuity of that devil."

The woman uttered the sentence quite calmly, but with a quiet emphasis which left nothing to be doubted of her sincerity.

"What seemed to you to be his favorite method of inflicting torture?"

"I have heard him, or one or another or his seven instruments—I cannot tell you more than I have already told of the identity of any of them—I have frequently heard one or another of them say these words: 'Break the heart before you break the bones; shatter the nerves before you shatter the frame; destroy the peace of mind before you destroy the body; pierce the thoughts before you pierec the flesh; mental torture is greater than physical suffering, therefore never kill the body until the spirit has bled itself to death.'"

"That seems to be the creed of Dazaar."

"Such is the creed of Dazaar."

"But he sometimes kills outright."

"Often, when the death of one person will bring suffering to another."

"Have you ever been forced to witness the suffering of his victims?"

"Frequently.

Nick took from one of his pockets a knife that Dazaar had sent him.

"Have you ever seen a weapon like this one?" he asked.

"I have seen many of them. It is one of Dazaar's daggers."

"Correct. Now tell me this: Have you ever seen any one of the victims of Dazaar, who, after death, bore somewhere upon his head or body, a blood-red, but miniature imprint of this knife?"

"Yes, several times."

"When and where? Tell me all you know about such circumstances."

"When Dazaar tires of a servant, that servant dies, and usually that mark appears upon the forehead after death."

"What is the manner of death? Can you tell me that?"

"I know about one of them. It was a man who worked in the stable. I was with him when he was taken ill and remained with him, ministering as best I could to his comfort, in that house which is without pity, until he expired."

"And his symptoms?"

"He first complained of a violent pain in his head. Presently he suffered great agony so that his face became distorted beyond recognition. After that there was a convulsion which lasted only a moment, but during which there was every evidence of almost intolerable pain. Then the limbs straightened themselves, the face resumed an expression of placidity as if all suffering had passed, the breathing became slower and slower until it ceased and the man was dead."

"And the mark?"

"It appeared exactly in the middle of his forehead within a few moments after death. At first it was faint and pink; presently the color deepened. By the time is was a bright red the shape of the dagger was perfect. Then the shade became darker and it gradually turned to purple and then almost to black, and it also lost its shape. That is all I know, for I did not see the body again."

"Were you with that man all the time from the moment he was taken with the sickness until he died, and until the mark appeared on his forehead?"

"Every moment."

"Then it was impossible that the mark could have

been put there after his death without your knowledge?"

"Absolutely so."

"And you have no idea how it came there?"

"Yes, I have."

"Ah! What is it?"

"The man's helper died of the same strange disease two days later."

"Well?"

"Dazaar—or the instrument who represented him—was angry when he knew of that. He did not intend the second man to die."

"Well?"

"I saw him, also, and the mark was on his forehead in exactly the same place. But this, sir, is the point. The second man was found dead on the stable floor. He was fully dressed, even to his hat, and the hat he wore was the same one that had been worn by the other man who died before he died."

"There is a great point in the suggestion you have made, madam," said Nick, "and I am indebted to you for the idea. What became of the hat after that?"

"I never saw it again."

"But your idea is that some unknown and violent poison which paralyzed the brain had been concealed in the hat, and that it was that which caused death?"

"Yes. That is my idea."

"The suggestion is an excellent one. So excellent, in fact, that I must leave you at once. To-morrow, or very soon, I will talk with you again, madam, for I begin to see that through you and you alone, can I get at the means of solving these mysteries connected with Dazaar. You think you know but little concerning them, but it has always been one of my pet theories that every man and woman in the world has stored in their brains a quality of information which I call unconscious. Unconscious information is that kind of intelligence which our senses gather separately and involuntarily, while the mind is occupied with other things. They are taken up and stored away in the brain, utterly forgotten until an acute and expert questioner brings them out of their hiding places."

"I believe that, sir. You mean that, for example, the eye will take in a much wider area than is included in the object upon which it happens to be focussed, and that the mind does not record in the memory more than the direct object itself."

"Oh, yes; the mind records it, in the sense that it files it away for future reference, as, for instance, if three letters were handed to me now and I should read two of them, and put the third in my pocket unopened. The third would doubtless pass out of my recollection, but if later on you should ask me how many letters I received to-day, I would recall the fact that there were three and that one of them remained unopened. Madam, there are unnumbered unopened letters in every mind. Many times in my experience I have obtained intelligence of great value from persons who honestly believed that they were incapable of giving me any assistance whatever."

The detective lost no time when he left the presence of Madam Aira, but, hastening to the street, he called a cab and directed that he be driven as rapidly as possible to the address of Miriam Gray.

"Moses," he said, as soon as the old negro admitted him, "find me the hat which Mr. Gray wore yesterday."

Old Moses appeared quite crestfallen for a moment, and then, with as much dignity as he could command under the circumstances, he said:

"I'm very sorry, sir, but the hat my marster wore yesterday was a hoodoo hat, and I done gave it away; that is, I mashed it all up in my hand and put it in the ash barrel last night, when he was first taken sick."

"But this is Sunday, Moses, and the ashes would not be collected to-day. It will still be where you put it. Get it for me. I want it."

Moses went in search of the hat, grumblingly. Having once classed it among hoodoos, he was not inclined to touch it again, nor did he intend to do so if he could avoid it.

Presently he returned and announced that it had disappeared.

"You see, sir," he explained, "the ash barrel stands under the steps in the area, and sometimes the iron grating don't latch. Most anybody wanderin' along de street could step in there and take the hat, an' I reckon that's what hae happened. Anyhow, it's gone."

"Moses, you are not telling the truth," said Nick, sternly.

"Well, then, sir, the truth is that I flung the hat into the furnace and burned it up."

"Why did you do that, Moses, and why did you lie to me at first?"

"I dunno, sir, why I lied. I reckon it was jest 'cause I didn't want to tell the truth. But I done burned the hat for sure, because it was a hoodoo."

"What made you think it a hoodoo?"

"Didn't my marster wear it yesterday, and wasn't he sick afterward?"

"Yes."

"Well, once before, when he put it on jest to wear to the corner and back, he was bad with a burning headache for an hour after he returned. I remembered that, and I says to myself that I reckoned that hat was a hoodoo."

"When was it that Mr. Gray wore it to the corner before, and had a headache after it?"

"Night befo' last, sir."

"Friday night, eh? Didn't your master have a call from a gentleman that evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember who it was?"

"No, sir, only that he had a French name, I think."

"Was the name Cortez?"

"Yes, sir, that was it."

"Now was it before or after that man was here that your master went to the corner?"

"Afterward, sir. Right after he went away."

"Were you here when your master came home from business Friday?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was it the same hat that he wore that day?"

"No, sir, it was a soft hat that he rarely wore."

"Do you know how he happened to put it on that evening when he went to the corner, instead of using the one he had worn during the day?"

"Jest because it was in the library, and handy, I reckon."

"Ah! It was in the library, eh?"

"Was it there while the visitor was in the house?"

"Sure, sir. It was always there. Mr. Gray kept it there to wear while he worked at his desk sometimes. He used to complain that his head was cold, and you know that was a soft hat, and I suppose it felt comfortable-like."

"Doubtless. Do you know how he happened to wear it to business the next morning?"

"Yassir. He said that his head didn't feel just right yet, and that it would be easier on his head than a stiff hat."

"Now, Moses, are you sure that you burned that hat?"

"Yassir, positive."

"I am very sorry. Now tell me about Miss Miriam."

"Well, sir, she is poorly, poorly. Two of her aunts are with her now, but, pore chile, her father's death done almost nigh onto killed her, for sure."

"Tell her I called, and say that I will come again early to-morrow."

When Nick reached the corner he went to a telephone and called up his own house for the specifice purpose of leaving word that if Ten-Ichi should happen to com-

municate with the house, he wanted him told to secure the hats that the dead men had worn when they were attacked, and that if Patsy should call up, he was to be told to ascertain and if possible secure possession of whatever articles Henry Malcolm had been carrying in the waistcoat pocket that had covered the sign of the dagger.

Having delievered these instructions, he received a message in return from the central office man who was on duty at his house.

It was a most astonishing communication, and this is what it was:

"The inspector telephoned a few moments ago and wished me to tell you as soon as possible that the man Dazaar had just been found, quite dead, in his cell."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROCK SALT BOX AND THE CROSS OF WAX.

The detective hung up the receiver, and there was a grim smile on his face.

"If it only were Dazaar," he said to himself, "but the very fact that he is dead is conclusive proof that he is not. He is only one of the men whom Madam Aira describes as instruments. That is all."

Nevertheless he went at once to headquarters, and there he found the inspector awaiting him.

"Dead, is he?" was Nick's greeting.

"Stark dead," said the inspector.

"When and how?"

"About an hour after you left here. I don't know how. The doctor says it is probably apoplexy."

"Have you examined him personally?"

"No. I thought I'd wait till you came."

The inspector turned to lead the way to the cell where the dead man had been found, but Nick put out his hand and detained him.

"Wait," he said. "Before we go in there I want to tell you something you will find."

"Find where?"

"On the body of the dead man."

"Well?"

"Somewhere on his body or on his head we will find a blood red imprint of a dagger exactly like the one that was sent to us in the box, only, of course, much smaller."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't think it; I know it."

"The devil you do! Look here, Nick, are you getting daffy over these Dazaar mysteries?"

"No. I'm beginning to get on the right track. If the sign of the dagger is not found somewhere on this man's body I will be all at sea again, but if it is there I will think that we will have comparatively plain sailing from this time on."

"Well, we will soon find out whether it is there or not," said the inspector, and he led the way out of the room.

Except a cursory examination made by the headquarters doctor, the body of the dead man had been left undisturbed until after the arrival of Nick Carter.

It was stretched at full length upon the cot in his cell, still arrayed in the turban and skirt-like draperies he had worn in life. It was evident that the doctor had done nothing more than look at the body, a fact for which Nick was duly grateful.

With a request that the others remain near the door but not enter the cell until he bade them do so, Nick stepped across the threshold, coming to a pause just within the doorway, and intently studying every nook and cranny of the place so that no object, however minute, might escape his attention.

He saw nothing whatever to attract his attention, save a shining, oblong object which rested upon the stone flagging beside the bed. In size it was about three inches, by two, by one, and he stooped and picked it up from the floor.

"Does anybody know how this came here?" he asked, holding it aloft; but each man there shook his head negatively.

"What is it?" asked the inspector.

"Simply two small pieces of rock salt fitted together so that they match perfectly, and with a portion hollowed out of the center of each piece so that they form, when held together by this rubber band, a perfect, but rather small box. How did it get here?"

Nobody replied to that question.

"Was the man searched thoroughly before he was placed in this cell?" asked Nick.

"Certainly he was," replied the inspector.

"Who searched him?"

"I did," said one of the men, stepping forward. "Tom Burleigh helped me. We found that box, and he begged so hard that we decided to let him keep it. He told us that it had something to do with his religion, and that if he let it go out of his possession, he would be accursed."

"Did you look inside it?"

"We did, sir."

"What did it contain?"

"Nothing, sir, but a cross that looked as if it was made of wax."

"What has become of it?"

"I do not know, sir, unless it is there now."

"A cross," meditated Nick. "A dagger shaped design might outwardly bear resemblance to a cross." Then, aloud, he added:

"Come here, inspector. Help me to tear away this turban. Unless I am greatly mistaken we will find the blood red sign of a dagger somewhere on this man's head, and you will also discover that the hollowed out portion of this rock salt box will just fit over it. There! Look there!"

Nick drew back quickly and pointed at the top of the dead man's head.

One glance was sufficient to prove to the others that the detective had been correct in his surmises, for directly at the center of the top of the head, where the hair was thin almost to baldness, gleamed the sign of the dagger, red, like blood, and perfectly formed.

Without an added word, Nick leaned forward and placed one-half of the box over the mark, and it being transparent, all could easily see through its surface that the hollowed portion exactly covered the mark.

"That is one on me, Nick," said the inspector, drawing back. "How in the world you could have anticipated all this, you will have to explain. I confess that I do not understand it at all."

"The man is dead," said Nick, "and if you will do me an especial favor, you will send at once for Coroner Grammercy. Inspector, we might as well return to your office. There is nothing more to do here."

"But what has become of the cross that was in that box?"

"Who knows? It is not in the folds of the turban, for I have already examined that, and its absence from that part of his dress satisfies me that he destroyed it before he died, doubtless for the purpose of concealing from us any notion of what really caused his death."

"Do you mean to say that he could kill himself with that thing? And that if he could, that after it had done its work, he would still have strength enough left to dispose of it so that we could not find it?"

"Yes, I mean that. Do you remember the man's condition when we talked to him this very day?"

"Yes. He seemed to be dopy."

"I think the poison was working even then. Perhaps it had already done its work, and he was only awaiting the climax. He might even have been suffering agonies at that time, and have successfully concealed the fact from us."

"And if that is true, he might also have dropped the wax cross somewhere between this cell and my office."

"True. It will do no harm to have a search made. And I should strongly advise, that if anything is found that resembles what Ben here saw, that looked like a cross, that it be at once deposited in this rock salt box, which is evidently, for some reason unknown to us, a safe receptacle for it."

"Ben," said the inspector, "did you hear what Mr. Carter said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you and Tom are relieved from duty without pay till you find that wax cross. It is somewhere between this cell and my office. It may be tucked away somewhere in a crack or crevice. Wherever it is, mind that you find it, and when you do find it, put it back in that little box, wrap it in a quilt, lock it in a cell, and then let me know about it."

"Inspector," said Nick, when they were alone together in his office again, "the sign of the dagger is the sign of Dazaar, and, although we may think that Dazaar is dead, he is as much alive as ever, and that dead man in there was only one of his puppets."

CHAPTER IX.

GETTING ON THE TRACK OF THINGS.

Nick Carter waited at the central office until the arrival of Coroner Grammercy, and then accompanied him to the cell where the dead body was awaiting his attention.

"I haven't exactly discovered your germ of apoplexy, coroner," he said, "but I have succeeded in driving it into its hole so that I believe we can succeed in nailing it before long."

Then, in as few words as possible, he related all that had taken place in the cell, and closed his remarks by asking this question:

"Do you know of any drug, or have you ever heard of one, that is sufficiently powerful to be dangerous to handle unless it is protected by a coating of rock salt?"

The coroner was compelled to admit that he had not.

"Well," said Nick, "I would advise you to make some inquiries among your scientific friends, for I am convinced that there is such a drug. More than that, it is so dangerous that I believe it has the power to go on murdering human beings indefinitely. I think we will discover that specimens of that drug, doubtless in the form of a powder, were concealed under the sweat bands in the hats worn by John Horner and Peter Druss, and that another powder of the same sort somehow found its way into a card case which Henry Malcolm carried in the waistcoat pocket that was directly over the sign of the dagger."

The coroner was too greatly amazed to reply.

"I am also convinced," continued Nick, "that Simon Gray was murdered by the same unknown agent, and that it was introduced beneath the band of his hat by a man who gave his name as Cortez, and whom I know to have been associated with this dead man here."

"Who killed this man?"

"He killed himself. Why, we do not know."

"Have you found any of these hats that are so deadly?"

"No. The one worn by Mr. Gray was burned by his man, Moses; at least that is the tale that Moses tells. But mark this: If that hat has not been destroyed, whoever dares to wear it again will die, for the drug that is concealed beneath the inside leather, will kill him as surely as would a bullet in passing through his heart."

"It seems utterly preposterous," said the coroner, "but you have certainly gathered facts enough together to support your theory to a point where I cannot deny its logic."

"You will find, coroner, that the theory is correct. Let us shake hands and work together."

"Done, Mr. Carter."

"Good. Now let me make a suggestion. The inspector and I have important business on hand for to-night, and until the time comes for us to meet, every moment at my disposal will be fully occupied. But there is something which you can do which will facilitate us all very greatly."

"Tell me what it is, and I will do it."

"Among your acquaintances in the medical profession, or out of it, you doubtless know several persons, or even one person, who might have heard of such a drug as I have described, even if they do not know much about it."

"I do know one man who makes a hobby of studying combinations of drugs. He is a close friend of all the great scientists, the Curies, of Paris; Lord Kelvin, of England; and others. If any man in this country would know anything about such things as you describe, it would certainly be my friend Hammer."

"Splendid! Lose no time, coroner. Go to him at once. Even if he is not himself posted in this matter, he will doubtless be able to put us on the right track. This is Sunday evening, remember. Do you think you will be able to find him to-night?"

"Yes. At his home. In his laboratory."

"Then let me suggest again that you lose no time. When you have found out all you are able to discover to-day, fit all these circumstances together as well as you can in your own mind, and meet me here, in the inspector's office, to-morrow morning at ten o'clock."

"Agreed, Carter. I'll be here."

"Something tells me that you will discover the missing link which we all need in the rather imperfect chain of evidence I have already put together; and it is the only link that is required to make the chain a perfect one."

Nick and the coroner left police headquarters together, but parted at the door, the latter to follow out the instructions given him by the detective, and the former to repair to his home to make ready for the journey into the State of New Jersey. It will be remembered that he was to meet Ten-Ichi and Patsy at the One Hundred and Thirtieth Street ferry at half-past ten, and that at midnight, in company with Inspector McClusky and others, he was to descend upon the two houses occupied by Dazaar and his crew. One, the house where the arch fiend was himself supposed to reside, and the other where Irma Plavatski and Madam Aira had made their home. The one where Patsy had so nearly suffered from the embraces of the maiden of steel, and the other, from which the man who was supposed to be Dazaar and who was now dead in a cell at police headquarters, had been taken a prisoner.

Nick arrived at the ferry house a few minutes before the appointed time, but neither of his assistants were there, and when, at a quarter of eleven, they were still absent, he hastily wrote a message on the margin of a newspaper he carried in his hand, and threw it in the gutter at a point where he knew it would catch Patsy's eye.

The lad was so well trained that if he should arrive at the ferry too late for his appointment, he would look for a message left for him in just such a manner.

"It will be unnecessary for either of you to follow me any farther," Nick wrote on the newspaper. "Return to the house and await me there."

It was exactly twelve o'clock when Nick reached the vicinity of the house they were to attack first, and at the point agreed upon, found the inspector and his men awaiting him. They had preceded him by only a few moments.

"It seems rather unnecessary for us to have so many men with us," said Nick, in an undertone to the inspector as they were crossing through the woods in the

direction of the house, "and yet, those black fellows who are with Dazaar are big and strong, and could put up quite a fight, I imagine, if they chose to do so."

The house, which was two stories high and perfectly square—being built around a courtyard which occupied the center—afforded no evidences that it was occupied. In fact, it seemed deserted when they approached it.

Directing the men to remain in the background, Nick and the inspector ascended the piazza steps and rapped loudly upon the front door.

When, after two or three minutes wait, there came no response to the summons, the detective turned the knob of the door, and pushing against it, discovered that it opened easily.

"Our birds have flown, inspector," he said. "We have come too late."

The statement proved to be quite true.

Calling to the men, they entered the house without opposition, and flashing their light ahead of them, they went from room to room.

The furniture had not been removed, but the draperies and hangings had been taken down, as also the paintings and pictures. These had been removed, but later they were found, nicely packed and put away for safe keeping in one of the rooms on the second floor.

"Come with me to the courtyard," said Nick, as soon as he was satisfied that there was indeed no human being save their own party on the premises.

There, however, he found a second surprise awaiting him.

The glass house in which the maiden of steel had been established and in which Patsy was once on the point of encountering death in its most awful form, had disappeared. Nor was there a trace of it left. Evidently it had been taken to pieces and the parts concealed somewhere.

The observing room of glass, in which Nick had been offered the opportunity of witnessing the torturing of Patsy, had met with the same fate. Not a sign of it was left.

Within the house there was not a scrap of paper to be found, and nowhere was there any indication whatever of the habits or conduct of the persons who had occupied the place before its desertion.

"We've had our trouble for our pains, Nick," said the inspector.

"So it seems."

"We were altogether too confident that we had the man Dazaar in our clutches. We should have come here sooner."

"It would have done no good," replied Nick. "Dazaar and his followers had left these premises before Ten-Ichi and I arrived in New York with the man we thought was the main guy of the outfit."

"How do you know that?"

"It is very simple. Do you remember that we had a light fall of snow that was half rain that night?"

"Yes."

"Much more of it fell over here than in New York."

"Probably."

"And the weather has been perfectly clear since. Now, slushy snow tracks a certain kind of soil that is unmistakable, and if you will take your light and examine carefully the marks of those men on the floor, and on the backs of chairs when they handled things, while their hands were wet from having been outside the house, you will see that they did their work during that little storm. We might as well return to New York, inspector; there isn't a thing to be found here."

"How about the other house?"

"Oh, we'll go through that, of course, but we will find it in the same condition. In order to get our grip safely upon Dazaar, I will have to begin all over again on quite another tack—and I already know what that will be. Come."

At the other house, less than half a mile away, it was as Nick had said with the one exception that Dazaar had left a message for them to read, when they should visit the place. It was tacked against the inner side of the outer door, and read as follows:

"It is with great regret that I find myself unable to be at home when you call, Mr. Carter, but be assured

you will presently be reminded in many ways of my continued existence. You will feel the hand of Dazaar without seeing it, but even though unseen, you may be sure that wherever you may happen to be, I shall not be far away."

CHAPTER X.

THE MOST WONDERFUL PRODUCT OF THE WORLD.

Ten-Ichi and Patsy were both awaiting the arrival of Nick Carter when he entered his house after the return from Jersey, and in each case their report was about of the same character. Neither had been able to obtain any definite information concerning the manner of death of the men they had been sent to investigate; but after they had received the telephonic instruction to look for the hats worn by two of the men, and the card case probably carried in the waistcoat pocket of the other, they had fallen against precisely identical difficulties; and these difficulties, considering what the detective already believed to be the truth of the matter, supplied almost conclusive evidence that his theory was the correct one.

Only a part of the stories told by Ten-Ichi and Patsy need be told here.

In the case of John Horner, the hat he had worn had never been seen since the man died. It had been utterly forgotten at the time, and it was supposed that it was lost. All that his friends and his family could tell about it was that he had been off duty at the time of his death, and for part of the day preceding it; that he had therefore not been wearing his uniform cap, but an almost new soft, felt hat that had been given to him by a man who crossed the ferry, and who, having a satchel and a hat in an extra bundle, had declared that he wanted to rid himself of it.

The description of this man tallied almost exactly with Nick's recollection of Murillo Cortez, and the detective's conclusion of the case was that Dazaar had fixed the hat and given it to the ferryman either as an experiment, or because he desired to spread that form of death around wherever he went, as a significant warning to Nick Carter, and the authorities in general, and for the mere pleasure of puzzling the doctors. Mainly, doubtless, because of a mere egotistical impulse to demonstrate his power.

In the case of Peter Druss, it was remembered that he had found a hat lying in the gutter while he was driving along the street. It was almost new, and was found to be a good fit, so he appropriated it. This hat had also disappeared since his death, and the policeman, who was present when he was picked up dead, recalled the fact that he had been closely questioned by a gentlemanly-appearing person who seemed to be a doctor, and whose description tallied with the other. He remembered that the supposed doctor had held the dead man's hat in his hand for a moment, while he was talking, but that was all he did remember.

"From this statement," mused Nick, "it would appear that our friend, Cortez, is the man who has spread the deadly instrument around him, and that he has watched in every case, for an opportunity to recover possession of the deadly stuff, whatever it may be, that he employs."

Patsy's report bore out this idea even with greater emphasis.

Henry Malcolm, clerk at the Hotel Kalamanka, was known to have carried, habitually, a red leather card case in the very pocket of his vest which Nick had indicated.

A man who answered perfectly to the description of the others had stopped at the hotel the day before the clerk died, and had remained until the evening after his death. He had been the first to go to the assistance of the suffering clerk when he was stricken.

The red leather card case had not been seen since the death of the clerk, and could not be found among his effects.

The stranger had registered under the name of Powers, but that was unimportant and told nothing.

The important feature in each case was that the same man had been known to be near by when each of the three men were stricken down, and that in each case the receptacle, in which Nick believed the instrument of death was concealed, had disappeared.

When the detective had directed his assistants to retire and get the rest they needed, he did not seek

his own bed, but passed the remainder of the night in poring over books in his library.

The mere idea that there should be in existence a drug of sufficient power to cause death after the manner in which those in question had been brought about, was beyond belief, and yet, likewise, almost beyond doubt.

But the books in his library told him nothing, and when the morning sunlight gleamed through the shutters of his windows, he put them aside with a sigh, and remarked to himself:

"It is all up to the coroner's friend, Hammer. If he cannot help me out of this dilemma, I will be thoroughly in the dark, with the single exception that I know in my own mind that that devil, Dazaar, does know how to procure or manufacture a drug or a combination of drugs that will do these awful and hideous things."

At eight o'clock he ate his breakfast and sighed because the time lacked two hours until he was to meet the coroner at police headquarters; but even as that thought passed through his mind, the telephone bell rang, and he heard the coroner's voice through the receiver.

"I think my friend has solved the riddle for us," was Grammercy's message. "He is going out of town this morning on important business, but will give you half an hour if you will see him at once. We will be there in fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes never seemed so long to the detective before, but at last the door bell rang and the two men entered.

As soon as the introductions were concluded, the scientist took a bundle from beneath his arm and proceeded to take away the wrappings; and, presently, to Nick's confessed astonishment, he placed upon the table before him, an oblong box of the size and shape of those which are made to accommodate oil stones, such as are used for sharpening tools; but it was the material of which the box was made that surprised the detective —or to speak more correctly, which pleased him, for it was rock salt.

"Mr. Carter," said the scientist, "our friend, Dr. Grammercy, has told me all the details accompanying the several deaths you are investigating, and I am very glad that I am entirely able to clear up this mystery for you, although I must confess that even a greater mystery will still confront me, after it is done."

"Then you cannot fully clear it up?" asked Nick.

"Oh, yes; I can, fully, as far as the criminal end of it is concerned. The mystery which confronts me is not as to the cause of death in the cases where this substance that I have here was the agent, but it is a mystery, and I fear will remain a mystery, how the man or men, who have made use of this means of killing, have been able to procure the radium they have used."

"Radium!" exclaimed Nick.

"Radium," repeated the scientist.

Nick stepped forward and was about to raise the lid of the rock salt box when his guest put out a hand and stopped him.

"Wait," he said. "Let me explain. I will do so in as few words as possible."

"Please do so," said Nick, and he dropped into a chair to listen.

"There is sufficient radium in that rock salt box that is on this table now to kill, one after another, every man now living in the world, and to go on killing, after that, forever and forever, for radium never diminishes in power or force."

"What is it?" asked Nick.

"It is a product that is derived from a kind of ore known to miners as pitchblend, which is found in the mountains of Asia, India, Northern Siberia, where there are only low hills, Norway, and in this country, in Colorado. From pitchblend we derive a substance, or mineral, called uraninite, and from uraninite, radium. Prof. Bacqueral first discovered the existence of radium, but he could not find the substance. Dr. Curie and Mrs. Curie, of Paris, discovered the substance. From five thousand tons of uranium residue, less than two pounds of radium can be extracted, and hence the enormous value of pure radium can barely be calculated, but it is worth about three million dollars a pound."

"Wonderful, is it not?" asked the coroner.

"Wonderful, indeed," assented Nick.

"One pound of pure radium loose in this room would burn out our eyes, destroy our bodies, and, doubtless, burn down the house, and, after that, it would keep on burning and burning without ceasing and without end. It is so powerful that it will never be extracted from the earth save in quantities of a few grains at a time. The only substance in which it can be confined and rendered harmless, is rock salt. Imbedded or incased in that, it is impotent.

"I have brought here, to leave in your care until my return in a few days, three tubes of radium, each of different strengths."

He lifted the cover of the box and pointed with his finger.

"That tube is the strongest one, and I should advise you not to handle it more than is necessary. Do not keep it in your possession more than a very few seconds at a time. But when you are ready to convince the inspector of the truth of your theory, if you will catch a rat and put that tube in the cage with him so that he must be quite close to it, or if you can, so that it will touch him, he will live less than an hour, and you will discover that the symptoms he manifests will be the same as those described to me by the coroner as being present in the cases you are investigating.

"Now, sir, I have done for the present. Radium is a wonderful and a dangerous thing. Its only safeguard is in the fact that it is so difficult to procure, that only exceedingly small quantities can be obtained, and that only with great expense. The very small quantity of radium that I have brought to you this morning is worth more than ten thousand dollars."

"Which explains," said Nick, "why Dazaar was so anxious to get the hats and the cardcase back into his possession."

"Indeed it does explain it. Now, sir, for what I have been able to do for you in this matter, I want you to promise to do one thing for me."

"I will gladly do anything in my power for you. You may be assured of that."

"I want you to promise me that when you catch this man, whom you call Dazaar, if you ever do catch him, that you will arrange so that I can see him and talk with him."

"I will certainly do that, sir."

"The point is this: The few persons in the world who have studied, and are still studying radium, believe that they know where every particle of it, that is in existence, is located, and now I hear of a man who unquestionably has a considerable quantity that cannot be accounted for. I would like to question him. I am told that he is a Thibetan. Possibly radium has been known in his country for a long time, and, if so, his information would be invaluable. You will do this for me?"

"I most certainly will."

"Then I will take my leave. I must catch a train."

"One more question, if you please, sir."

"Well?"

"The man in the cell, at police headquarters, managed to dispose of his radium after it had done its work. How do you suppose he did that?"

"By swallowing it."

"Would it not poison him instantly?"

"No. But a month after he is buried, if you should attempt to exhume the body, you would find nothing there. The radium would have destroyed his flesh and bones, and the shred of clothing that were buried with him; that is, of course, if the radium he used was as strong as I have reason to suppose."

"Inspector," said Nick, at the central office, two hours later, "we know now what killed the man we thought was Dazaar, and we think we know that Dazaar is killing others. The thing for us to do now is to find the real Dazaar."

THE END.

Next week's issue, the fourth of the series specially edited by Chickering Carter, will contain "The Devil Worshippers; or, The Defiance of Dazaar." You have heard of that mysterious sect of Devil worshippers, in London and Paris, who have latterly invaded New York. Nick is one of the few outsiders who knows the ghastly secrets of their awful religion.

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